DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 700 PS 028 773

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TITLE Training Fathers To Develop Reading and Writing Skills in Young Children with Disabilities.
PUB DATE 2000-07-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Head Start National Research Conference (5th, Washington, DC, June 28-July 1, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Reading; Beginning Writing; Childrens Writing; *Disabilities; Early Experience; *Emergent Literacy; Family Environment; *Fathers; Literacy; *Models; Parent Child Relationship; Parent Influence; *Parent Role; Parents as Teachers; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Program Descriptions

ABSTRACT

The potential benefits of father participation in their children's reading and writing activities include improved literacy skills, increased bonding, and heightened self-esteem of both fathers and children. This paper identifies a training model for working with fathers--Project DADS. Using this model, early childhood professionals can foster male involvement in their children's literacy learning by describing benefits; suggesting appropriate activities, materials, and expectations; and providing ongoing, proactive feedback. The paper describes the steps in the Project DADS model: (1) recruitment; (2) authentic observation; (3) early social interaction; (4) reading books; (5) prewriting and writing; (6) environmental/incidental print; (7) school-home interaction; and (8) technology. (Contains 16 references.) (EV)

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Abstract

Early father-child literacy activities can provide many rewards. The potential benefits of father participation in their children's reading and writing activities include improved literacy skills, increased bonding, and heightened self-esteem of both fathers and children. The purpose of this presentation is to identify a training model for working with fathers: Project DADS. Early childhood professionals can foster male involvement by describing benefits, suggesting appropriate activities, materials and expectations, and by providing ongoing, proactive feedback.

Training Fathers to Develop Reading and Writing Skills in Young Children with Disabilities

During the 1990s, adult illiteracy has been one of the major public concerns in the United States (Marvin & Mirenda,1993). Paralleling this concern is an increase in attention of early childhood leaders toward *emerging literacy* paired with matching adult facilitating behaviors (Bruggleman,1998). The emerging literacy perspective suggests that economically disadvantaged homes may contribute to the literacy problem because they often lack environmental factors correlated with literacy, such as, availability of printed materials and writing utensils, and adult-child interactions with literacy materials (Marvin, & Mirenda, 1993).

Children with disabilities face even greater risks in relation to literacy development because of low parental expectation levels. For example, Light and Kelford-Smith (1993) found that parents of young children with disabilities ranked making friends and development of communication and self-care above literacy development while parents of their non-disabled peers gave literacy a higher priority.

The literature documents the importance of parent involvement in relation to children's educational achievement (Wilson, 1991). In particular, parent involvement has had important short-and long-term effects in the area of literacy development (Morrow, 1997). While early childhood leaders have long encouraged participation of mothers, they have only recently begun to assert a need to involve *fathers* (McBride & Rane, 1997).

The purpose of this presentation is to describe a model for training fathers in early literacy development. Although many writers include listening, speaking, and thinking in their definitions of literacy, we have delimited it to *print literacy* (i.e., reading and writing).

Project DADS – A Training Model

Early childhood personnel can expand literacy activity of fathers and their young at-risk and exceptional children by explaining the benefits of male involvement, suggesting appropriate activities and materials, and by sharing expectations. Expansion of male involvement is especially important in inclusive early childhood settings where research has only recently begun to focus on literacy of younger children with developmental delays or disabilities (Cousin, Weekley & Gerard, 1993; Patzer & Pettegrew, 1996; Zucker, 1993). Toward this goal, fathers who already engage in literacy activities with their children can serve as mentors for other interested fathers who may need assistance.

Step one, of the Project DADS' model, is *Recruitment* of fathers (See Figure 1). Fathers are solicited by having their children take home from school letters describing the purpose of the training, when and where it will be held, and are asked to describe their current experiences with early literacy activities. Interested fathers are contacted by Project DADS staff members.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Step two is *Authentic Observation*, observing fathers and children as they interact in their environments (Trussel-Cullen, 1996). This step employs Brugleman's *Early Literacy Scale* (1998) to identify emerging developmental behaviors in the child such as gross and fine motor skills, as well as response and initiations to language used in books, songs, and the adult's matching

facilitating behavior. The observer checks items on the scale and records anecdotal notes. This step is optional and can result in bypassing the authentic observation if the father views himself as having sufficient experience or knowledge in early literacy skill development.

The subsequent six steps represent areas of training. These include: *Early Social Interaction*, *Reading Books*, *Prewriting and Writing*, *Environmental/Incidental Print*, *School-Home Interaction*, and *Technology* (see also Stile & Ortiz; 1999; Ortiz, Stile & Brown, 1999).

Early Social Interaction. As Morrow (1997) has pointed out, we no longer believe that literacy is something that develops overnight (e.g., at age 6 1/2). Instead, there is research evidence to indicate that literacy begins in infancy when children begin to interact with others in their immediate environment. This interaction can include singing, talking, and playing together. For example, "regards face" normally develops during the first month and "smiles spontaneously" by the end of the second month (Frakenburg, & Dodds, 1992). The following vignette illustrates early social interaction that might take place when the child is two months old:

> Two-month old Hanna was being held by her father while her mother was talking at the door to a neighbor. Suddenly, Hanna began staring into her father's eyes. Hanna's father put his face close to Hanna and smiled. He said, "I love you Hanna--you are Daddy's little angel from Heaven." Hanna returned her Daddy's gaze and smiled spontaneously.

Reading Books. Fathers may begin to read books to children as early as birth to three months. While being held, bathed, or fed, young listeners appear to find the reader's voice comforting. Training in this area includes information

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regarding different types of age-appropriate books available including rhythmical language books, point and say books, touch and smell books, board books, and early picture storybooks. The children's section of many local bookstores (e.g., Waldenbooks) often distributes lists of age-appropriate reading materials free to the public.

Prewriting and Writing. Fathers are encouraged to take an active role by engaging their children in prewriting and writing activities, such as grasping objects, tracing lines, and copying shapes. Other areas of pre-writing training include left and right discrimination, eye-hand coordination, shoulder stability, dynamic tripod grip, putting stickers on horizontal/vertical lines, and cutting strips and circles with scissors (Utah State University, 1998). Fathers also learn to complement the teacher's formal writing instruction by creating a writing center at home.

Environmental/Incidental Print. Fathers can learn to make use of printed materials found in and around the home and community for literacy development purposes. Environmental print is familiar print found in the surroundings such as logos, food labels, and road signs (Morrow, 1997). Incidental print can be described as spontaneous reading and writing activities, for example when father and child are riding through the community and the child asks, after passing a McDonald's restaurant, "Dad, how do you spell hamburger?" Engaging in environmental/incidental print activities can be informal and spontaneous, and often child-initiated. Yet, this type of activity can also be formal and structured, such as a weekly reading routine of children's storybooks. Involvement in environmental/incidental print may take place in the home (e.g., reading books aloud to children at bedtime, reading television ads,

and writing letters to family members) but are not limited to that setting. For example, typical environmental/incidental print activities can take place while the father-child dyad is traveling by car through the community as in the following vignette, modified from Morrow (1997):

> Drew was now four years old and loved traveling by car around town with his dad. As they drove by the mall on this morning, Drew spied the large sign above a department store and said, "Look Daddy, I can read those letters on top of the store, M. A. C. Y. S. Those letters spell Sears!" Drew's dad said, "that was great reading--you got all the letters right. Now I'll read the sign--it says Macy's. This is another big store like Sears. You read to me like a big boy when you saw that sign.

Another vignette reported by Ortiz (1994) shares a similar story:

> When driving to her grandma's house, my daughter will ask what street she (grandmother) lives on. I tell her to look for Pioneer Street and then ask her what letter does the word start with. I also ask that she try and spell the word. She will spell the word so that when we come to the street she recognizes the sign and lets me know we're there. I do this with other signs or places we go to.

School-home Interaction. Fathers are exposed to the importance of participation with their child's education and the tremendous benefits that father involvement can have. Fathers are also provided options for levels of participation (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996) and are engaged in self-assessment of their own comfort level. During this segment of the training, it is emphasized that learning does not stop when the child exits the school doors at the end of the day. On the contrary, learning should be supported and reinforced at home by the parent.

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Fathers are encouraged to take an active interest in the learning process that is occurring within the school by asking them to think of ways they can supplement their child's learning. This can include volunteering to read to children in the classroom, helping out at school related social functions, and becoming a member of the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO). At home, fathers can help out with their child's class assignments, visiting the local library, and reading with the child memos and other materials that are often sent home by the school.

Technology. In support of the new and innovative ways in which computers can aid in the development of early literacy skills, Project DADS has turned to technology as a useful tool to train parents. Before exposing fathers to the varied functions of computers and related software, they are asked to "brainstorm" their current knowledge of technology, such as type of computer they are familiar with, software programs they may have used or heard of, and level of expertise on running a computer.

After this information is collected and it is determined to what extent fathers are familiar with current technology, fundamental philosophies on the use of computers is shared with the fathers.

- Computers have a great impact in our daily lives.
- Computers are becoming more available to our children in schools.
- Computers affect the way we interact with print and text.
- Computers affect our ideas about literacy (reading and writing).
- Parents can use computer technology to develop early reading and writing skills with their young children.

Fathers are then trained in the areas in which they have expressed an interest and/or a need (e.g., audiovisual materials, drawing and word processing, e-mail, and accessing the Internet).

Conclusion

Trussell-Cullen (1996) has suggested that, "the foundations of literacy are laid at home during the early years (p. 176)." In our presentation, we will provide a rationale for involvement of fathers in providing these foundations, described the Project DADS training model, and list research questions for future investigation. On the basis of our presentation, we hope that interested participants will replicate Project DADS at home to promote early literacy activities among local fathers and their young children with disabilities.

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Figure 1. Project DADS Training Model